

THE

# Khanjar

Courtesy of the  
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Bonyad



Shahname Kolaleh Khavar (By  
Courtesy of Ketabkhaneye Majles)  
—1268 hegira (1851 AD), the Qājār  
Period (1794–1925 AD)

## DAGGER OF THE AYYĀRĀN

By Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani

**T**he *khanjar* (plural *khanjarhā*) is a curved double-edged Persian dagger. In the majority of Persian miniatures, the warriors are depicted holding a *khanjar* in a reverse grip. It is unclear when exactly the double-edged curved *khanjar* became fashionable and came to be used in Iran. The Digital Lexicon of Dehkhodā describes the *khanjar* as a ‘sharp weapon’ and states that it is also called a *deshnē*. It adds that *khanjar* was a weapon carried by *ayyārān*. *Ayyārān* made up a community of free warriors who, through a ceremonial oath, voluntarily pledged to remain faithful to a lord, becoming his subordinates and

followers. Unfortunately, the shape of the *khanjar* is not described in the Lexicon of Dehkhodā.

Several Persian manuscripts describe the *khanjar* as being used in close-range fighting. The *khanjar* is mentioned as early as the *Shāhnāmē* in the chapter ‘Sohrāb’ (Ferdowsi, 1995/1384:189). It is also mentioned in the manuscript *Samak Ayyār* (Al Kateb al Rejāi, 2004/1383:57), the Timurid manuscript *Zafarnāmē* (Yazdi, 1957/1336a:212), the Safavid manuscripts *Rozatal-Safaviye* (Jonābodi, 1999/1378:288), *Ālām Āraye Shāh Tahmāsp* (1991/1370:336), *Eskandarnāmē* (Hakim, unspecified date:317), the Afsharid manuscript

*Tārikh-e Jahāngoshāy-e Nāderi* (Esterābādi, 1991/1370:72), and the Qājār manuscript *Rostam al Tavārikh* (Asef, 2003/1382:240). The mention of the *khanjar* in so many different manuscripts, beginning with the *Shāhnāmē*, indicates that, by AD 1400, this weapon had likely been in use for centuries. This makes one wonder why many *khanjars* in today’s market are automatically attributed to the Qājār period.

### Blade shape and development

The majority of Persian *khanjars* found on the antiquities market and in museums are attributed to the Qājār period (AD 1794–

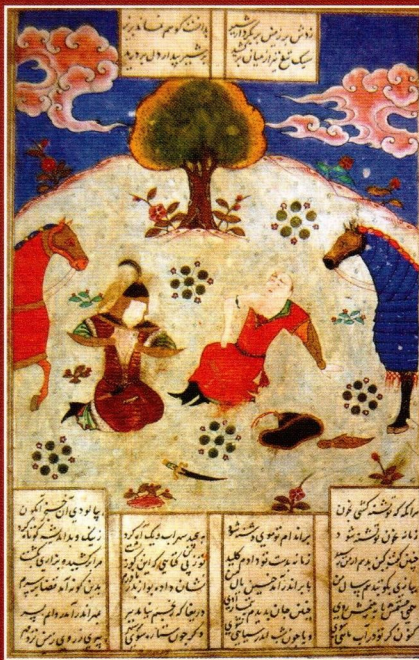




**Shāhnāme** (By courtesy of Reza Abbasi Museum-No, 1971) – The battle of Keykhusrow against Shide (The school of Shiraz), the Timurid Period (1370–1506 AD)

1925). The *khanjar*, with its graceful curve, is one of the most beautiful weapons among Iranian arms. Most Qājār examples have an I-shaped handle and an aesthetically curved blade, most with a central midrib. Examples with fullered blades also exist, however. The strong blade is normally made of crucible steel and has a midrib; sometimes the edge of the area close to the forte is strengthened and left unsharpened, creating a double-fullered visual effect. Although the majority of *khanjars* have watered steel blades, there are also examples of plain steel (high carbon) blades. Customarily, the midrib runs directly into the tip of the blade, terminating in a reinforced point. Zeller and Rohrer (1955:131) cite some authors who believe that this feature is a result of the fact that this weapon was used as an armour-piercing device. The blade is straight for the first half, after which it curves strongly. In general, the grip is made of one solid piece of walrus ivory. There are examples with all-metal handles as well. Stöcklein (1981:2576) believes that the oldest extant Persian dagger from the Islamic era was excavated at Osterrode, in former East Prussia, and adds that this dagger presumably arrived there during the Tartar invasion in 1410 AD. It has a typical I-shaped handle and the blade is double-edged and straight. The handle is of iron, showing traces of gilding and a decoration with foliate patterns. Based on the decoration and provenance, Stöcklein estimates that this dagger stems from the

14th century. Stöcklein (1981:2576) further asserts that curved daggers followed the same evolution as the swords, i.e. that they were initially double-edged and straight, but later gained a slight curvature. Based on the idea that the earliest examples, from c.1400 AD, were straight, he postulates that these daggers were not in use prior to the 15th century. This statement should be treated with extreme caution. Many historical chronicles, manuscripts and epics refer to the *khanjar* as a dagger that was used in close-quarter combat by *ayyārān* in earlier centuries, as described above. Stöcklein (1981:2576) further contends that, following the trends of sabres, *khanjars* tended to be more curved in the 16th and 17th centuries. This is also a point that needs thorough research of miniatures and extant *khanjar* pieces from Iranian museums.



**Shāhnāme** (By courtesy of Golestan Palace Museum; No, 2173) – dated 847 hegira (1443 AD) (The school of Shiraz), the Timurid Period (1370–1506 AD)

Some of the examples of *khanjars* are sharpened along the entire length of the concave side, while the convex side is not sharpened for a couple of centimeters, starting from the forte (as long as the blade is straight); these blades are typically reinforced (they have a T-shaped section). The sharpened part on the convex side starts where the blade begins to curve. The blades of these examples do not have midribs that run the whole length of the blade. Instead, the midrib starts at the convex side where the blade begins to become sharp and runs to the tip. It is not surprising to see that these types of *khanjars* were held in the reverse grip, as depicted in miniatures.

## Handle and scabbard

The handle is generally cut from the ivory and carved into the desired shape. Then, the tang of the blade is inserted into a recess in the handle using pitch or a natural resin. Some of the handles are carved. The quality of carving varies from piece to piece. Due to the hardness of the ivory and the amount of work spent on carving, this technique was only performed on relatively few *khanjar* grips. Walrus ivory was the preferred material, but there are examples of Persian *khanjars* with elephant ivory handles. Other materials for making the handles of *khanjars* include horn, bone, jade and metal. Although some *khanjar* handles are cut from jade, this is quite rare. There are two examples of jade-handled *khanjars* in the Military Museum of Tehran. One has a handle of greyish jade, with the upper and lower parts of the handle cut in floral designs. The other example has a handle of green jade (see Moshtagh Khorasani, 2006: cat. 212, page 582 and cat. 234, page 601).

The scabbard of a *khanjar* is made of two halves of wood that are fitted exactly to the shape of the blade and are thus, necessarily, curved. The scabbard is normally covered with black shagreen leather that is typically decorated with the same relief ornamentation under the leather that is used on *shamshir* scabbards (Zeller and Rohrer, 1955:131–2). On some pieces, instead of shagreen leather, coloured velvet or brocade is used. Sometimes scabbard fittings are used that are made of bronze or silver. There is normally no loop for hanging the *khanjar*, since it is tucked in the belt, sash or girdle so that only the grip is visible. According to Zeller and Rohrer (1955:132), the *khanjar* is carried either on the right or left side of the body, but never in



**Shāhnāme** (By courtesy of Reza Abbasi Museum) – Tying Afrafiab out of the cave – circa 828 Hegira (1425 AD), the Timurid Period (1370–1506 AD).



the middle; however, they add that the majority of the figures with *khanjars* carry this dagger on the right side.

### Decorations

Some *khanjars* have a floral design at the forte of the blade. There are also examples with chiseled or gold-inlaid inscriptions from the *Qur'an* at the forte. Some specimens have a metal handle with silver or gold inlay or overlay. Some of the ivory *khanjar* handles feature very delicate carving and present wonderful examples of workmanship and art. The ivory on the handles of these examples is sometimes carved with scenes of figures reminiscent of Sassanian art; others are decorated in a more European style (the transference of European elements into Persian art is called *farangisāzi*, meaning 'Europeanising') (see Najmabadi, 1998:9-81). Other examples include handles carved with inscriptions.

There is a long history in Iran of using ivory for art pieces and monuments. According to Pope and Ackerman (1981:2659), trade ivory from Kussa, India and Arachosia was used in decorating the Achaemenian palace at

Susa, and one can see some tribute bearers in the Persepolis relief bringing ivory tusks. Both authors add that the earliest actual examples of carved bone were found at Olbia on the Black Sea, dating to the Parthian period (250 BC- 226 AD). Intricately carved figures of Parthian princes and naked women can be seen on one of these pieces (see Pope and Ackerman, 1981:2660). The tradition of carving ivory was first established during the Sassanian period. Pope and Ackerman (1981:2661) point to a carved and engraved ivory casket in the Stocklet collection and date it towards the end of the Sassanian period (226-651 AD) or possibly post-Sassanian. Another very interesting object is a knife with a carved ivory handle from the Sassanian period. This knife was excavated at Barghuthiyat and shows the profile of a man wearing a high helmet. The tradition of making carved ivory and bone handles for knives was already practised in Iran in the medieval period. Referring

A *khanjar* from the Qājār period with chiselled and gilded metal grip and scabbard

A *khanjar* from the Qājār period with gilded decoration close to the forte

to a carved bone knife handle from the medieval period, Pope and Ackerman (1981:2662) explain that the handle shows a human head, wearing a high straight head dress, with a net wimple.

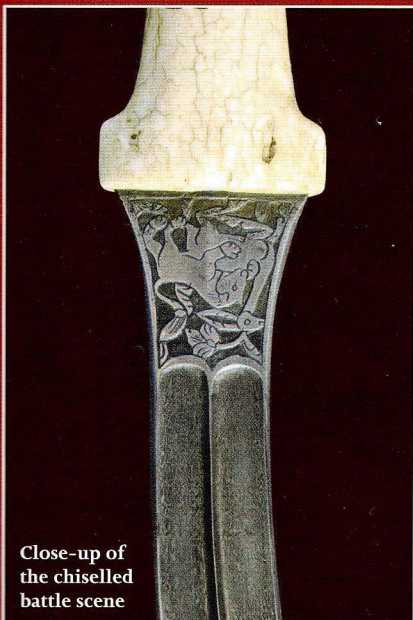
Pope and Ackerman (1981:2663) refer to an elephant rook made of ivory from the Timurid era (1370-1507 AD) and state that there are accounts of ivory boxes with enamelled gold mountings at the court of Shāh Abbās II. They also state that the craft of ivory and bone carving continued into the 18th century and suggest that the craft was mainly devoted to the production of knife (dagger) handles and powder horns during this era. The subjects presented on



Close-up of a carved walrus ivory dagger from the Qājār period

these carved *khanjars* range from stories from the *Shāhnāme* to erotic scenes. It is suggested that Qājār artists began using the images of ancient Iran in their art pieces in the second half of the 19th century. Some scholars, such as Lukonin and Ivanov (2003:238), state that the reasons for this development remain ambiguous. However, even in the era of Fath Ali Shāh Qājār (1759-1834 AD), the interest in ancient Iranian art was revived, as Fath Ali Shāh ordered his artists to carve rock reliefs depicting him in the same fashion as the rock reliefs of Sassanian kings.

Some *khanjar* handles are made of metal (iron or copper) which has been beautifully enamelled. The enamels are decorated in floral designs and birds in shimmering and vivid colours (see Jacob, 1985:166). Allan and Gilmour (2000:148) suggest that these *khanjars* were probably made in Shiraz, citing the famous reputation of Shiraz for its enamelling and the presence of a large number of *khanjars* with enamelled hilts and scabbards that



Close-up of the chiselled battle scene



survive from the Qājār period. Indeed, it is tempting to view the *khanjar* as a product primarily of Shiraz, and the *kard* dagger as belonging to Isfahan. Allan and Gilmour state that there appear to be no surviving *kards* with enamelled hilts; this appears to support the proposition that enamelled *khanjars* were made primarily in Shiraz. However, this proposition does not hold true. There is an excellent example of a Persian *kard* with an enamelled hilt in the collection of the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (see Piotrovsky and Rogers, 2004:165). Furthermore, Isfahan itself is one of the largest production centres of enamelling in today's Iran, indicating a historical enamelling tradition in the city. On the same topic, Bronstein (1981:2588) states that excellent Iranian enamellists crafted magnificent enamellings up to recent times in Isfahan, and that this tradition dates back

to the Safavid period. Still, he does admit that the great enamelling centre was Bihbahan, near Shiraz. Another example of a *kard* with an enamelled hilt and scabbard is kept in the Rezā Abbāsī Museum in Tehran (for other examples of *kards* with enamelled handles and scabbards, see Moshtagh Khorasani, 2006:614-615, cat. 254, cat. 255).

Regarding the art of enamelling, Bronstein (1981:2588) states that the Persian artisans use a various range of colours in their enamels, such as shades of rose (deliberately graded) with a bluish cast, royal blue, turquoise blue with various hues, and translucent green of emerald tone. The craftsmen use an opaque white for the foundation. Based on the accounts of Benjamin from the 19th century, Bronstein further explains that Persian craftsmen used three techniques of enamelling, namely painting, *champlevé*, and *cloisonné*, employing copper as the most common foundation. Both *champlevé* and *cloisonné* techniques consist of creating a design using vitreous enamels in sunken areas or areas surrounded by metal. According to Wulff (1966:33), *minā* (coloured glaze enamel) has been manufactured in the south, especially in Isfahan, since the time of Shāh Abbās.

Full list of references and further reading available on request.



A *khanjar* from the Qājār period with chisled battle scene between a lion and an antelope

A *khanjar* from the Qājār period with a walrus ivory grip and a scabbard in relief work



A *khanjar* with enamelled handle and scabbard from the Qājār period. Courtesy of the Cultural Institute of Bonyad

## Descriptions of *khanjar*

Different terms are used to describe *khanjar* in the Iranian manuscripts. These terms can be divided into the following classifications:

- a) Terms describing the watered pattern of a *khanjar*, such as *khanjar-ē ābdār*: a (lit.) dagger with water; dagger with a watered blade (Rozat al-Safaviye, Jonabodi, 1999/1378:683) and *khanjar-ē ābgūn*: dagger with a tempered blade (Shāhnāme, Ferdowsi, 1995/1384:210).
- b) Terms describing the decoration of a *khanjar*, such as *khanjar-ē morassa*: bejewelled dagger (Rozat al-Safaviye, Jonabodi, 1999/1378:202), *khanjar-ē daste morrasa*: a dagger with a bejewelled handle (Ālām Ārāye Shāh Tahmāsp, 1991/1370:336), and *khanjar-ē jāghūt negār*: a dagger decorated with rubies (Irān Dar Zamān-e Shāh Safi va Shāh Abbas Dovvom 1028-1071 hegira, Qhazvini Isfahani, 2003/1382:455:491).
- c) Terms describing the origin of a *khanjar*, such as *khanjar-ē hendovān*: dagger of Indians (Shāhnāme, Ferdowsi, 1995/1384:295), *khanjar-ē mēsrī*: Egyptian dagger (Zafarnāmē, Yazdi, 1957/1336b:510), and *khanjar-ē kaboli*: a dagger from Kabul (Shāhnāme, Ferdowsi, 1995/1384:446).
- d) Terms related to fighting with the dagger, such as *khanjar-bāzi*: playing (fighting) with the dagger (Eskandarnāme, Hakim, unspecified date:317), *khanjardār*: dagger owner/fighter (Zafarnāmē, Yazdi, 1957/1336a:212), *khanjar-godāz*: someone who hits with a dagger and causes burning or melting; a dagger fighter (Rostam al-Tavārikh, Asef, 2003/1382:126), *khanjar-gozār*: a fighter who fights with a dagger (Eskandarnāme, Hakim, unspecified date:613), and *khanjar-gozāri*: dagger fighting (Rozat al-Safaviye, Jonabodi, 1999/1378:288).
- e) Terms describing the individual target zones and fighting techniques, such as *khanjar bar shekam va pahlū zadan*: to hit with the dagger on the belly and the side (Tārikh-e Ālām Ārāye Abbāsī, Eskandar Beig Torkaman, 2003/1382:347), *khanjar bar sine zadan*: to hit the chest with the dagger; a technique that involved stabbing the chest with a *khanjar* in a reversed position (Samak Ayyār, Al Kateb al Rejāi, 2004/1383:57), and *khanjar dar shekam zadan*: to stab the belly with a *khanjar* (Ālām Ārāye Shāh Tahmāsp, 1991/1370:336).
- f) Terms describing the efficiency of a *khanjar* such as *khanjar-ē jān-setān*: a life-taking dagger (Zafarnāmē, Yazdi, 1957/1336a:101), *khanjar-ē khūmrīz*: a blood-shedding dagger (Tārikh-e Ālām Ārāye Abbāsī, Eskandar Beig Torkaman, 2003/1382:83), *khanjar-ē kharāshekāf* (Rostam al-Tavārikh): a dagger that cuts granite stone (Asef, 2003/1382:240), and *khanjar-ē zakm-zan sandān-shekāf*: the injury-causing, anvil-splitting dagger (Samak Ayyār, Al Kateb al Rejai (2004/1383:57).



Close-up of  
the chiselled  
walrus ivory  
handle



A khanjar from the  
Qājār period with  
chiselled walrus  
ivory grip

